

Would you be able to identify what is a challenge in our city and what is not?

Tonight the City of Greater Sudbury is having a public consultation meeting for next year's budget and one of the issues that might be brought up is accessibility.

With 22,000 people in the city having some sort of disability, reporter Hilary Duff set off on a journey to talk to people who have accessibility issues.

Good morning Hilary.

Hi Markus.

1. What is the City of Greater Sudbury currently doing to address accessibility?

Well the city is required to put together an annual accessibility plan under the Ontarians with Disabilities Act. So in order to do this, there's a panel made up of city councillors and members of the community that have some sort of accessibility issue. The panel met a few weeks ago to get input from the public in hopes that what was discussed there will become part of the bigger picture budget for 2013.

Before I say more, I did want to point out that this plan is only to address the services and structures that the city has control over. That means places like public buildings, intersections, sidewalks, and non-physical items like the police, city council, etc.

2. Okay, so when I think of an accessibility issue, I often think of physical and visual disabilities.

That's how I felt too - these two issues are often the easiest to see since they're more often associated with a wheelchair or a seeing eye dog or cane, so we'll start there.

Here's Andrew Olivier. He's a member of the city's accessibility panel and has been a quadriplegic since he was 14.

"The most apparent obstacles are normally the physical barriers, and on a daily basis I see those types of things, I see problems with the sidewalks and the curb cuts. It's very frustrating when you come up to part of a sidewalk that is completely unmanageable. I consider myself a little bit of a daredevil with my wheelchair to go around these types of areas and there's a lot. Hopefully we can get these things fixed up. It's up to the people who use these areas to call and voice their concerns to help get these things fixed."

Another person I touched based with is Rita Belanger. She has about five per cent of her vision, and her issues are also infrastructure-related.

"The sidewalks, they're so broken up that you have a hard time to walk. You'll either walk and all of a sudden there will be a dip. They should be repaired. The lights, they're not long enough for people with any kind of visual impairment or handicap, anything like that, they're not. I have to listen to the sound of the traffic for me to go by a six-lane highway."

3. You mentioned that these issues are the ones that are visible to people, but accessibility problems stretch beyond that, right?

Definitely, Markus, and that's actually a misconception that a lot of people have, including myself. When I emailed Andy Crépeau and Pat Presenza with The Canadian Hearing Society, I told them that I'd be asking them to describe the city barriers they faced in terms of

intersections, roads, things like that. Really, though, these physical obstacles don't affect people with a hearing loss at all.

Andy, the gentleman who is hard of hearing, rightly called me out on that. Andy is completely deaf in his right ear.

Here's how he describes people with a hearing loss.

"It's an invisible disability, that's the challenge in itself, because out there being invisible, people just don't get it. I believe that most people don't know how to react. Everywhere I go, I identify myself as a person with a hearing loss. A lot of people get very intimidated by that and because they don't know how to react to people with hearing loss because there has been no sensitivity training, no educational workshops out there, instead of people coming up and saying "okay, how can I communicate effectively with you?" people shut down, people put up their own barriers."

After hearing from Andy I was really struck by how much you can be discriminated against just because your accessibility issue isn't something that people can see.

Pat Presenza, who is fully Deaf, says it's accessing city services and meetings that's the challenge for him. Pat communicates through an interpreter, meaning that he used American Sign Language throughout our entire interview and the interpreter translated his gestures into speech.

"The major barrier is communication. As Deaf people we use American Sign Language to communicate. For example if I'd like to go to a city council meeting, well I'm interested in going, I'm interested in finding out what's going on, but there's no communication there for me. I feel left out, like I'm out of it. A lot of times I just give up, you know it's not worth the hassle, but I'd like to get involved. So it's fairness to all people in our community."

4. So Hilary, what did you learn needs to be done to improve the fairness, to make the community a fairer place for people with accessibility issues?

Well there was one theme that everyone I spoke with kept coming back to, and that was this need to educate people about disabilities so they're aware of what's out there. When I was doing my research I found that there were challenges that I never would have even thought of, so just creating a discussion around these issues is enlightening.

Here's Andrew Olivier who we heard from earlier. He's one of the members of the accessibility panel.

"Awareness is the first step to getting things rectified. To me, if you see someone walking down the street and you notice they're having a hard time on a sidewalk or whatnot, notify someone and say "you know what I did see someone having problems with a bad sidewalk in front of my house." There's ways to get your concerns to the city, and that's really important. The more that people are aware of these things, the more that things will get changed."

I thought I'd give the last word to Linda Mende. She's another member of the accessibility panel, has a minor learning disability and also has MS so she has to walk with two canes.

"Just because you have a mobility issue, doesn't mean that you're stupid. I'm sure some of the Deaf people have probably said people tend to yell at you if you're Deaf and when people are blind, people don't seem to understand how to help a blind person. How do you understand a

mental illness or a learning disability? Education, education, education. How does the general public know how to work with us? It's pretty simple - ask us."

5. What comes next for the accessibility plan?

Well the accessibility panel is meeting again on July 17 to draft up its plan for 2013. In the meantime, people can raise still raise their concerns at the city's public budget consultation meeting tonight.

Thanks for sharing these stories with us, Hilary.

No problem, Markus.